

8. OCCURRENCE OF THE SOOTY TERN (*STERNA FUSCATA*) AT  
POINT CALIMERE, TAMIL NADU

After the publication of the earlier note (*JBNHS*, Vol. 78 (2): 377) I picked up another specimen of this species on the seashore at Point Calimere (10°18'N; 79°51'E), Thanjavur Dist., Tamil Nadu, on 17th June 1981. Only the wings (287 mm.) are preserved in the B.N.H.S. collection (Reg. No. 26083). This is the first record of its occurrence on the eastern side of Tamil Nadu, one storm-tossed (?) individual having been found at Tirunelveli (IND. HB. vol. 3: 62). It would appear that the species is occasionally found on the mainland, being swept inland or cast

ashore.

In the meantime Mr. H. Abdulali (Per. comm.) again visited the Vengurla Rocks, West Coast, India on 10th May 1981 and saw several desiccated wings and remains of terns. They included one body and wings which are undoubtedly of this species and his first record (1942, *JBNHS*, 43 (3): 446-451) was no doubt correct. See his note below.

I thank Dr. R. Sugathan for providing facilities for the field work. This observation is part of the Society's Avifauna Project.

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9. PIGEONS (*COLUMBA LIVIA*) NESTING ON THE GROUND —  
SOME MORE BIRD NOTES FROM THE VENGURLA ROCKS

Twelve species of terns have been recorded from the neighbourhood of Bombay and several of the marine forms were known to nest on the Vengurla Rocks, 4 to 5 miles off-shore about 200 miles south of Bombay and one of the few places where they are known to do so.

As far back as February 1875, Hume (*Stray Feathers* 4: 420) visited Burnt Island the largest of the group and found innumerable added and broken eggs with desiccated corpses of young and old birds, which he confidently named as the Brown-winged Tern *Sterna anaetheta*. In addition he found a few very much larger eggs which were too decayed for preservation but which had "the charac-

teristic markings of one of the larger Laridae" and which may well have been of *Sterna bergii*.

In February 1938 and March 1941, I visited the island again (*JBNHS* 41: 661-664, and 43: 446-451) and though no terns were seen on the island we found evidence similar to that obtained by Hume for the nesting of *Sterna anaetheta*, *fuscata*, *bergii*, *repressa* and *dougalli*. In view of the element of uncertainty attached to the identification of *S. dougalli* and the possibility of having over-looked some of the other oceanic species occasionally washed into Bombay during the monsoon, I had always wanted to make a visit during, or as close as possible to, their breeding period, presumably during the monsoon i.e. June to September.

Early this year I was able to get the assistance of Vice-Admiral M. P. Awati, Flag Officer Commander-in-Chief, Western Naval Headquarters, Bombay, who offered to have us dropped on the island by a naval frigate *en route* to Goa and to pick us up on its return a day or so later.

Accompanied by Rishad Naoroji, a keen photographer of birds, we boarded the I.N.S. "Himgiri" on the night of Friday 8th May 1981. The ship sailed on the following morning and during the coming night anchored about 1 mile south-east of Burnt Island.

When forty years younger, I had discovered that the rocks were "the hardest in the world to sleep upon" and this did not make me very anxious to be marooned thereon for twentyfour hours or more with no terns to look at. It was therefore arranged that we land early in the morning and decide in half an hour if we would like to be taken off at 11 a.m. or stay till the morrow. A helicopter *recce* put out at 6 a.m. came back to report some "sparrow-like" birds. We took off in a motor-propelled whaler at about 6-30 a.m. with the paraphernalia necessary to stay overnight. As we approached the rocks a large flight of birds in the distance which appeared to have taken off the island raised hopes. A little nearer, we saw small flocks of pigeons (*Columba livia*) come off the lighthouse rock, and it was evident that the others could only be the same, though as many as a hundred were seen together at one time.

On the first trip we had seen a small flock of 10 to 15 pigeons, including an albino, and noted that one collected had fed on grass seeds. Hume had also seen them in 1875. The second time he noted a few flying out of the cave. Their numbers had now multiplied enormously. There can be no doubt that these are feral and must have originated from those

on the lighthouse island half a mile away. They have probably resorted to nesting on the flat ground after the standard ledge sites inside the cave and elsewhere were exhausted. There is no evidence of their going to the mainland to feed, but the large flight first seen may suggest some form of concerted movement. I would estimate about 200 pigeons on the island.

Landing had to be made by jumping on to tide-washed rocks, and our luggage, including the camera, was left behind. The island was more broken up than I remembered and we clambered through the coarse grass and other low vegetation which covered every inch of the island which was not bare rock. The dried-up remains of birds picked up in the opener areas included mummified chicks and wings of pigeons and terns but the latter appeared to be fewer than before.

Out of the dense grass and other vegetation numbers of pigeons rose with a flutter in the manner of the Painted Partridge when beaten out near Bombay (though of course never so numerous!). A closer examination revealed that the birds were rising off their nests mostly with 2 eggs or young. Some 15 nests were examined. As I did not remember seeing or reading of pigeons nesting on flat ground in the shelter of small overhanging stones or tussocks of grass in the manner of game birds, the apparent sparsity of the remains of terns and the abundance of the pigeons, prompted the suggestion that the latter had driven off the terns and appropriated the island to themselves. I put this to Derek Goodwin of the British Museum (N. H.) at Tring and though he did not think this likely he suggested that I put my notes on record, for they were unusual. He also referred me to Moreau in *Ibis* 1944: 36 where he noted the surprising predilection of the dove *Streptopelia semitor-*

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

*quata* Ruppel for islets in the Mafia group all down the east African coast. Here Piggot found many of them nesting (with eggs) in bushes on the coral islets, "where they come flying in to roost from the mainland every evening."

The cave where we had seen numbers of the Edible-nest Swiftlet was examined from the fallen-in-skylight. Some of the Swiftlets were seen (9.30 a.m.) flying about near the entrance both over the sea and the island. On our earlier visits we had only seen them when they left at daylight and returned in the evening. No nests were visible from the skylight and it was difficult to imagine how we had reached the mouth of the cave at sea-level without any ropes.

Four Turnstones were seen on the tide-flooded floor of the cave entrance. This was rather late in the season.

Except for the remnants referred to above, there was no trace of the terns until at about 10 a.m. Rishad drew attention to some 50 birds circling up in the air east of the island over the water half-a-mile away. They were largish birds with the upperparts showing brown and the underparts pure white when they turned in flight. The bill and feet were dark. They were undoubtedly *Sterna anaetheta*. After some watching they appeared to be of 2 distinct sizes, the larger birds showing black and not brown above. These were *fuscata* a fact confirmed by the measurement of the dry wings picked up on the island.

This removes the doubt regarding this species expressed after examination of the material collected on the second trip. There were many more *anaetheta* than *fuscata*. They flew in circles fairly high over the water making no attempt at fishing. They would occasionally scatter and reassemble on the other side of the island. Single birds or pairs often separated and flew in a line towards the island, but did not reach it.

Three large terns with orange bills (*S. bergii*) flew across, calling loudly.

On the west of the island about half-a-mile away large numbers of small terns were scattered over the water, many moving together but all more or less staying in the same area.

The mummified chicks were identified by Dr. Jon Fieldsa, Zoological Museum, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, as of the Little Tern (*Sterna albifrons* subsp.) and this is the first record of this species nesting on this island. The subspecies could not be determined but the nearest breeding records from near Bombay are of *S. a. sinensis* the White-shafted Ternlet.

We are indebted to Admiral Awati for arranging the trip and to Captain Singh for the courtesy and co-operation extended to us during the voyage. We hope it will be possible to visit the island again at a more opportune time and get more information about the birds which nest there and also determine if the increase in the number of feral pigeons has in any way affected the breeding of the maritime species.

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